CHAPTER 12

Ancient Idols, Lascivious Statues, and Sixteenth-Century Viewers in Roman Gardens

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In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, noble families, wealthy prelates, and antiquarian scholars in Rome began amassing collections of ancient sculpture and inscriptions for display in palace courtyards and villa gardens. By the 1550s, ancient sculptures had become prominent visual attractions in most of the large garden and villa estates surrounding the city as collectors attempted to emulate the design of ancient villas. Through displaying ancient statues in gardens and opening these gardens to visitors, collectors could cultivate and promote a magnificent and noble identity, sustained by the trappings of wealth, the virtue of liberality, and venerable Romanitas (Roman-ness).


2 A term rarely used in antiquity, Romanitas was first coined by Tertullian (De pallio 4.1) to mock the Carthaginian imitation of Roman social habits in attempts to claim a Roman identity. Its negative association faded during the Middle Ages as the Church absorbed the practices of Roman law, thus combining the ideas of Roman identity and culture with the idea of Christianitas. With the growth of humanism and the interest in the material and literary remains of ancient Rome during the fifteenth century, the idea of Romanitas became a means of asserting authoritative Roman imperium and cultural superiority as inherited from the ancients. By displaying ancient statues and inscriptions, a collector sent a social and
Throughout the sixteenth century, foreign and local visitors to Roman gardens regularly lavished praise upon ancient statues and recorded their admiration in both written and visual form.

The fascination with antiquities and the passion for collecting and displaying ancient works was widespread in Renaissance Rome, but not everyone was so enamored with ancient art. In the first decades of the sixteenth century, a few conservative critics decried the pagan and idolatrous nature of ancient sculpture, and as church reform gained momentum and the Council of Trent’s influence became more pronounced, ancient statues were increasingly the object of derision and negative reception by certain viewers, owners, and art theorists. Complaints often centered on concerns similar to those expressed about sacred images in post-Tridentine Italy: the immorality of nudity and overtly sexual themes and the importance of proper decorum. Yet there were other issues that influenced or conditioned the negative reception of ancient sculpture. The great majority of garden owners, collectors, and viewers in Rome were well-educated men with connections to the Church, indicating that the gender and social identity of viewers played a role in how ancient statues were perceived and discussed. Further, sixteenth-century ideas about the persuasive power of images, both sacred and profane, also played a crucial role in the arguments made by critics of ancient works. Finally, the sensual, verdant settings of Roman gardens and their relatively open accessibility made them extremely popular (and to critics, dangerous) enticements for unrestricted leisure and pleasure.

In order to better understand the varied and sometimes complex perception of ancient sculpture displayed in gardens, this essay examines the small but strident negative reception history for antiquities in sixteenth–century Rome. Previous scholarship has considered the negative reception of ancient sculpture only in scattered or individual cases, perhaps for understandable reasons. Fueled by an enthusiasm for history, beauty, artistry, and the symbolic and social power conveyed by its ownership and display, ancient art was widely appreciated and revered in the Renaissance. Detractors were thus few and far between. But negative reactions to ancient statues show that the taste for and political message that connected him to the glory of ancient Rome. In the sixteenth century, the concept of Romanitas was a way to substantiate claims to an authentic noble Roman lineage. For developments in the use of Romanitas in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Christian, Empire without End, especially Chapters 1–2. Recent scholarship in classical archaeology and ancient history has questioned the validity of the concept of Romanitas to define social identity within an ancient context. See Louise Revell, Roman Imperialism and Local Identities (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–39.